



Response to the First Nations digital inclusion roadmap



Introduction

We live in a rapidly changing world, where the ability to access, afford, and effectively use digital services is not a luxury, it's essential. As identified in the First Nations Digital Inclusion Advisory Group's (the Advisory Group) Road Map discussion paper, digital inclusion is a requirement for full and equal participation in contemporary life to enable people to access essential government, education, social and health services.

However, the Australian Digital Inclusion Index suggests that 1 in 4 Australians are digitally excluded and First Nations people are 7.5 points behind the Australian average with a progressively widening digital gap experienced by First Nations Australians in regional, remote and very remote areas.¹

The establishment of the Advisory Group was very welcome as a first step in reaching Target 17 in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap for equal digital inclusion by 2026. We were also pleased to see that there has been some government investment to support the recommendations by FINDIAG to aid initial work and data collection to better understand and respond to the digital inclusion needs of First Nations people across Australia.

We thank the Advisory Group for the opportunity to provide feedback on the Road Map and appreciate all the work that has gone into its development. Achieving equal levels of digital inclusion is critical for First Nations Australians to receive equal economic and social opportunities in our increasingly digital world.

Given Good Things Australia's experience in delivering community-based digital literacy programs through a network of Digital Mentors and our UK colleagues' experience in establishing a National Device Bank, we will focus our submission on responding to questions for these two areas.

¹ [Australian Digital Inclusion Index](#), 2023, Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., & Ganley, L. Melbourne: ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, and Telstra.

Programs delivered by Good Things

Through our programs, research and outreach initiatives over the past 6 years, Good Things Australia has learnt some key lessons about best practice digital inclusion program delivery to individuals but at scale. Good Things delivers a mix of national digital inclusion programs and state based initiatives including:

- [Be Connected](#): Our national digital ability program for over 50's, run in partnership with eSafety and DSS. This program has engaged two million Australians in essential digital skills support, delivered online and in local communities through our network
- [Digital Sisters](#): Our initiatives to close the digital divide for women. We're helping women keep up with tech changes, like AI, and have a special focus on supporting refugee and migrant women
- [Get Online Week](#): Our national digital inclusion awareness and education campaign, reaching 23K people through local digital skills events and 56.8M through our media campaign in 2023 alone
- [Bridging the Divide](#): Our projects supporting people with disability, including people with intellectual disability and people with low vision
- [Digital Skills for LIFE](#): Ensuring families have the essential digital skills and access they need for life – work, school and fun
- [Digital Communities](#): We buddy up local organisations, create connections and run place-based programs to create holistic, community led solutions
- [Digital Health](#): Our initiatives supporting people with chronic health conditions, carers, parents and older people to learn essential digital health literacy skills
- **Digital Mentor Capability Assessment**: Partnering with State Library of QLD we developed a digital skills and mentoring assessment tool for QLD public library and Indigenous Knowledge Centre staff and volunteers, with customised reporting to help staff develop their professional development plans based on their results.

Although these programs are not focussed solely on supporting First Nations people, we offer some of our learning in case it is useful in the implementation of the Digital Support Hub and Network of Digital Mentors.

Key learnings

Through our initiatives over the past 7 years, we have gained key insights into delivering impactful digital inclusion programs. Some of these include:

- Community based digital skills programs, when supported with online learning, digital mentor upskilling and grant-funding, have positive digital literacy and social inclusion outcomes. In the case of Be Connected it also provides a return on investment of \$4 for every \$1. This is a model that has been piloted to support other digitally excluded cohorts and found to be just as effective. [See Be Connected social impact evaluation.](#)
- Trusted local digital mentors are the heart of digital inclusion programs, and core to their success. They do not have to be education or tech experts, and with many being volunteers, they are most often highly motivated local community leaders who are uniquely placed to build trust with participants. Digital mentors are passionate and committed people from a wide variety of roles and professional backgrounds and oftentimes may have evolved to take on the role from becoming accomplished participants themselves. Since 2017, Good Things has supported the recruitment and training of 15,000+ digital mentors across Australia to provide peer-to-peer training to our program participants. The community sector is powerful in closing the digital divide, but it needs support to do so. This support must include grant funding to contribute towards costs of providing this support, including to micro support groups. It must also include ready to use program resources and upskilling for staff and volunteers running the programs.
- A diverse network of providers reaches those most in need. Libraries and community centres across the community have for many years been providing digital skills support programs. Yet digital literacy learning is often best delivered where people already feel comfortable, so we have found that having other community providers including CWA's, Men's Sheds, disability services, employment services and cultural support groups means that more people can find a trusted place they feel safe to access support and have great outcomes. There is a significant opportunity to engage community-controlled organisations in the delivery of digital literacy programs.
- Digital literacy learning material needs to be culturally relevant and appropriate and supported by local bi-lingual digital mentors. We have 2,299 organisations in our Network who have indicated they provide support to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, yet the numbers of First Nations people supported in our

Be Connected program have been very low. Feedback provided has been that the Digital Literacy content available on the Be Connected eSafety learning site is not culturally appropriate and that this, alongside the need for increased funding, is one of the key reasons that the engagement has been low.

- Awareness campaigns and community engagement initiatives improve uptake of programs, and budget for marketing campaigns and community outreach is needed to bolster participation rates.
- Digital skills programs must be complemented with digital access and affordability measures to truly close the digital divide for all.

Networked model

Good Things Australia designs and delivers digital inclusion programs across Australia to close the digital divide so no one is left behind. The networked model enables us to reach people most in need of support through our passionate network of 4,000 community organisations across Australia.

Our network of community partners is diverse in location and organisation type, with 60% of our network based in metro locations, with 40% in regional and remote locations. Our network includes organisations such as Neighbourhood Watch groups, public libraries, seniors groups, CWA branches, community centres, training providers and community colleges, retirement villages and aged care, employment services and cultural support groups.

We resource our network to deliver digital inclusion programs through professional development and upskilling, creating ready to use digital mentoring resources, creating and sharing high quality learning resources for people wanting to learn digital skills, supporting organisations through our telephone and email helpline, and distributing small grant funding.

It is essential to provide local organisations with funding to support delivery of digital inclusion programs and every program we design includes funding to enable local organisations to deliver place-based delivery. Since 2017, we have awarded \$30M+ small grants to community organisations in Australia.

We believe that the Networked approach provides the opportunity to allow place-based responses to digital inclusion and delivery at national scale. Although not exactly clear, we expect that the implementation of the Digital Support Hub and

network of Digital Mentors announced in the 2024/25 Federal Budget will support a networked model that builds experience in local places and with support from a national level.

At Good Things, we know that our community partners understand their communities best, so we do not require organisations in our network to deliver the programs in any set way. They have the opportunity to create programs that meet the needs of their communities and deliver these in the way that suits best. The flexibility is provided by grant contacts that are flexible and require only high level outcomes and outputs along with outcomes through standardised measurement tools – we use our Digital Skills Checker.

Our experience in delivering in this way for programs such as Be Connected and Digital Sisters shows that by combining high quality centralised knowledge, training and resources that are shared with grant funded local providers, we capacity build existing organisations to support people to improve their digital literacy. Our innovative [Digital Skills Checkers](#) assesses the learning needs and outcomes for people participating in our programs. They have shown that community-based digital skills learning has a significant positive impact. For people participating in Be Connected:

- 93% reported increasing confidence using technology in one or more ways
- 86% improved their overall digital skills
- 98% reported improved social connection after participating in Be Connected

High quality and culturally appropriate learning content

To save already stretched organisations time in developing materials, Good Things provides access to digital literacy expertise through high quality resources and learning materials that they can use.

For First Nations communities one gap is the existence of culturally appropriate and accessible high quality online digital literacy content. This content exists to support the general population to build essential digital skills. [Be Connected](#) has an extensive range of online courses, topics and activities that supports older people. Likewise, [Good Things Australia](#) has collated a range of content across different topic areas for people developing essential digital skills including digital health. Your [Online Journey app](#) has

been developed for a First Nations audience by eSafety Commissioner, but this has not had the take up expected.

Our experience is that high quality online learning content is essential to the delivery of community-based digital skills support, to ensure that it is up to date and that local digital mentors do not need to spend time creating all of their own content. We believe this is a gap that needs to be filled to support digital literacy development for any national First Nations digital mentoring program. We know that **Indigmob** has developed and delivers a fantastic suite of resources that communities can take advantage of according to their needs, so there is an opportunity to develop this into online learning materials to support delivery.

Digital Mentors

Digital mentors are the heart of our network, so we were pleased to see that funding has been provided to support the establishment of a First Nations network of Digital Mentors to support people in local communities. Our experience highlights that Digital Mentors not only provide support to others but develop their own skills and experience leading to longer-term employment. As one of our mentors recently indicated:

Digital mentoring and volunteering helped me to get a job here in Australia. Being part of Digital Sisters was a great experience for me. I'm really happy because working is so good for me. This job is helping me to learn new things, especially how to engage with new people in a new culture. I feel so grateful." Digital Sisters digital mentor

Although we have been delivering digital mentor training for seven years, we have only recently started to measure the learning and development needs of our digital mentors at scale and explore how we can provide individualised learning pathways. We have recently tested the development of a new Digital Mentor Skills Checker with Public Library and Indigenous Knowledge Centre (IKC) staff in Queensland. The digital skills checker provides each person with an individual report on the areas they may want to seek additional learning in with links to appropriate resources. The initial test of this Checker has found:

- 60% of staff in Queensland libraries and IKCs surveyed have over 3 years experience supporting patrons to learn digital skills.
- Staff are most confident supporting patrons to use library apps and catalogues, but least confident to support them to use online banking services.
- Staff are most confident in providing support to patrons who drop into the library, but are less confident at running group sessions, particularly keeping them engaged with icebreakers and other activities.
- 89% of staff stated it was important or very important for them to keep up with technological changes to be able to help others better.
- 79% of staff usually or always use feedback from learners and their own reflections to change the way they help people to learn digital skills.

These initial findings are helpful to build the professional development and training pathways for people who are Digital mentors. We intend to continue to develop this Digital Mentor Skills Checker and role it out across our programs, to better support our Digital Mentors. We would be happy to share this learning with the organisation chosen to lead the Digital Mentor network and see if this tool may be adapted for use to support Digital Mentors.

Digital literacy for First Nations people and communities in 2026 and beyond – the impact of AI

With the explosion of AI into the world, we strongly believe that any digital literacy program must include the understanding of AI tools, safety and data protection. Over the past few months, Good Things Australia has been exploring the intersection of AI literacy and digital inclusion through a combination of community consultation and testing the delivery of AI related content. We have worked collaboratively with Microsoft, Telstra, academics and experts in AI along with on the ground experts in our community partners across the country to build our understanding of AI literacy and how it fits within community based digital literacy programs.

To be able to deliver an AI literacy program with relevant learning resources, and support materials, we first needed to better understand AI, AI literacy and the

intersection between AI literacy and digital inclusion. The Good Things team conducted research through surveys to our network of community partners and consultations involving over 56 organisations and individuals from various sectors, including government, academia, technology, social impact sectors. We also spoke to women who will be learning about AI literacy as participants in our Digital Sisters program. Bringing together representatives from these varying stakeholders, our insights were further refined during a cross-sector roundtable held in early May.

With the broadscale public use and understanding of AI still in its infancy, this research with tech experts, community workers, academics and government has been fascinating. In each conversation, we learnt something new about the benefits and risks of AI, alongside how people are using AI for good.

Our key findings included:

- AI will not solve digital exclusion and could make it worse if we don't address the basics of access and affordability.
- A person needs to have basic digital and literacy skills to use AI powered tools and devices, although AI tools can help to overcome some barriers to use technology.
- AI has the ability to positively impact efforts toward digital inclusion through tools that support easier communication.
- The speed at which new AI tools and technologies have increasingly been developed and deployed means that it is difficult to predict how exactly it will impact society in the near and distant years. Yet it is a transformative technology that will shape our world and it is up to us to decide whether this is for good or bad.
- AI literacy education is a collective responsibility rather than an individual one. We cannot expect people to be able to access, engage and learn about AI on their own, there needs to be support and we should look to community based approaches to encourage a broader scope of learning.

Our research also found that:

- Social Impact organisations are well placed to support people to build their AI literacy because of their contact with people most in need, but they need

resourcing and training to build their knowledge and confidence in how to do this.

- Social Impact organisations need access to free or affordable AI tools that currently require paid subscription to ensure they are using the best and most reliable AI tools can offer.
- Social Impact organisations are well placed to support development of responsible AI due to our strong focus on human-centred and inclusive design. Yet participation in the design of AI, requires resources and training for not-for-profits to support development and leverage AI tools effectively and safely.

From a First Nations lens, in addition to the barriers above, it was emphasised that language is also a key barrier with the huge diversity in language and culture across 240 different nations and up to four languages being spoken in some communities alone. As yet, AI has not been trained to translate into all of these different languages, so the benefit of AI as a translation tool does not exist for First Nations people.

This highlights the reasons why it is essential for First Nations people and communities to be involved in the development of responsible and ethical AI tools and to amend the bias that can be found in existing large language models that feed existing tools.

One example of a positive benefit of AI for First Nations communities can be seen at the Centre for Inclusive Design. Their pilot project supports co-design and the development of a culturally appropriate avatar based AI translation tool for deaf Aboriginal people to support communication between individuals, communities and the justice system.

Unless First Nations digital literacy programs start to include AI literacy as core content, there will be a significant gap in knowledge and experience that will be required particularly in jobs in the future.

Our full research report will be available in August and we are happy to discuss our findings further with the Advisory Group, should they wish for further information on what we have found.

National Device Bank

Our colleagues at Good Things Foundation in the UK established the first National Device Bank to support refurbishment and redistribution of digital devices to digitally excluded people in the UK..

We believe that the establishment of a National Device Bank in Australia is a key pathway to supporting digital inclusion and were pleased to see this as a recommendation in the report. The experience of our colleagues in the UK in developing a [National Device Bank](#) and [National Data Bank](#) alongside digital literacy support provided through the National Digital Inclusion network provides a whole service model provided to people who are digitally excluded. So far in the UK, the National Device Bank has:

- 360+ local organisations providing devices to their communities
- 6,600+ donated devices have been distributed to people
- 2,750,000+ CO2 emissions have been avoided by reusing devices
- 26,000+ kg of electronic waste have been kept out of landfill by being reused.

Donation of devices from the Government is essential to ensure a Device Bank is sustainable. The new [UK Government has recently committed to donating all appropriate devices to the National Device Bank](#). At London Tech Week, just prior to the Labour Party's successful election to establish Government in the UK, Peter Kyle, Shadow Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology announced:

“A Labour government will lead by example by looking to donate appropriate laptops, tablets and phones to digital inclusion schemes, when they are no longer used by departments. Once they are cleaned up and secured they can be reused by people who need them instead of being put in a landfill.”

We support the Advisory Group to continue to advocate to all levels of government for a commitment to donate used devices to a National Device Bank. In addition, although it is a very different context, should the Advisory Group wish for further information on challenges and successes with the establishment of this infrastructure in the UK, we could arrange a session with our UK colleagues.

Conclusion

Digital inclusion is a requirement for full participation in our digital society and economy, enabling people to access essential Government, education, social and health services. While the initial investment to support First Nations digital inclusion is welcome, there is much more that needs to be done to ensure we are able to close the gap for Target 17. Good Things Australia thanks the Advisory Group again for the opportunity to provide a response to the Roadmap.

Given our organisational purpose to close the digital divide so no one is left behind, we would welcome the opportunity to share learning and experience and work alongside the First Nations led organisation selected to deliver the Digital Support Hub and Digital Mentoring network.



Good Things
Australia

**Learn more about our work:
<https://goodthingsaustralia.org/>**

Contact: Jess Wilson

Good Things CEO

Email: jessica.wilson@goodthingsfoundation.org

Phone: (02) 9051 9292